

Venezuela

In 1498 Christopher Columbus first set foot on the continent of South America in Venezuela. It was his third voyage to the New World. The name Venezuela means “little Venice” . The first Spaniards to explore the country encountered natives living on Lake Maracaibo in houses built on stilts and were reminded of the great Italian city .

The largest tribes in Venezuela prior to Spain's arrival were, among others, the *Caracas*, *Arawaks*, *Yanomami* and *Cumanagatos*. Very few descendants of the original inhabitants remain. Epidemics (especially small pox) during the Colonial period killed off most of the Indian population. Because the natives were the work force in Venezuela, slave labor had to be brought in to fill the needs of plantation owners as the native population died off. Today only 2 % of the population is made up of Amerindians and the rest is mestizo, zambo, mulatto, white or black. The *Yanomami* is one of the only tribes that has survived and remained isolated from the modern world in the jungle area that Venezuela shares with Brazil.

In 1811 Venezuela became the first colony to declare independence from Spain. The man who led the fight for Independence, *Simón de Bolívar*, was Venezuelan, but he also fought for independence in several other colonies: Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia. He remains the national symbol in Venezuela.

Since their independence over 200 years ago, Venezuelans have gone through some chaotic changes in government , but in 1959 a democratic, multi-party government gained control and ended the years of dictatorship and military rule. The president serves a 5-year term and has help in governing from the Senate and Chamber of Deputies.

Today, Venezuela is one of the richest countries in South America because of the discovery of petroleum in 1914. This export has brought in many foreign companies and changed Venezuela from a mostly rural to a mostly modern, urban country. More than 80% of the population lives in the larger cities. Over 90% of all households own a television. Do you know what the 2nd largest export is in Venezuela? Telenovelas, or Spanish soap operas. Every Spanish speaking country in the world with a broadcasting system receives telenovelas from Venezuela.

La Geografía (Geography)

Venezuela has five different geographic regions. The west side of the country includes part of the Andes Mountains, which separates Lake Maracaibo from the rest of the nation. In the north are the coastal lowlands and the coastal ranges which separate Caracas from the coast towns. Central Venezuela is dominated by the *LLanos*, or grasslands. This area is eternally caught between drought from January to

April and flooding during the rainy season from June to October. Millions of head of cattle are raised on the Llanos by *llaneros* (plainsmen/cowboy). In the East is the Orinoco Delta, a dense jungle area surrounding the Orinoco River, the third largest in South America. The last region in the south is the Guyana Highlands, a jungle-like region with large areas of *tepui*s, or high granite tablelands, which includes *Salto Angel* (Angel Falls), the largest waterfall in the world: 16 times higher than Niagara Falls!